

PROFILE



an audience of students at St. Paul's School about her experiences in World War II.
Photo by Doug Barber

Tragedy Open Eyes

Hiltgunt Zassenhaus knew what she was getting into when she defied the Nazis and helped save thousands of people. But she did it anyway.

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Conscience. Dr. Hiltgunt Margret Zassenhaus believes it's the key trait that separates man from all other creatures and the single force that can prevent the destruction of our planet.

"Conscience is something you can't see or locate, but it's that miracle of God born within us that allows us to make choices about our lives," said the soft-spoken, German-born woman who saved the lives of more than a thousand people from destruction by the Nazis during the Second World War.

"While living under the Nazis, I learned that there are few people in this world who are truly good or evil," Zassenhaus, a Baltimore resident since 1952, told an audience of 600 students at St. Paul's School in Brooklandville at a recent Human Rights Day assembly. "The majority of people simply don't care, and they're the ones who can be influenced by evil. Evil can only happen when good people do nothing."

Upon meeting Hiltgunt Zassenhaus, a pleasant woman with an engaging smile in her early 70s, one is instantly taken with her simplistic and idealistic views of the world. Yes, she admits, evil does exist in the hearts of men, and the Holocaust was a savage atrocity in the annals of mankind that, stimulated by similar maniacal thinking, could occur again. The way to prevent hatred from spreading, Zassenhaus says, is to delve into our consciences and determine what is right and wrong.

"We must think about what we can do as a person to help bring about peace," she told the students, ages 13 through 18, in her thick German accent. "We all have the same hopes and dreams and desires for our lives. Like families, we can argue but we must find a way to live together."

The tone of her voice grew cold as she noticed a group of teenagers in the audience who were becoming increasingly restless and inattentive.

"Everywhere one goes," she said, looking sternly at the disruptive, indifferent teens, "one sees young people walking around with those earphones on their heads, listening to music from a radio box that they're carrying somewhere on their bodies. Their eyes are glaring and they're totally oblivious to life. It's so sad. They're not alive."

"The quest for serving life is with us everyday," Zassenhaus continued, raising her eyes to the rest of the young audience. "We all have choices. But what we do with those choices and our consciences is something that only we can determine. That's a miracle that no one else can discover."

Living in Germany during the era of the Third Reich gave the non-Jewish Zassenhaus a first-hand opportunity to witness the dangers of indifference and the imperative of "serving life." Brought up by her liberal parents according to Albert Schweitzer's humanitarian values and the belief that good will always conquer evil, Zassenhaus was an early opponent of Adolph Hitler, especially after seeing the rise of Nazism ruin the lives of her Jewish friends and the career of her academician father.

"Everything Hitler said, he said in a loud voice," she said. "People try to convince others by screaming. Hitler screamed so loud, people started to scream with him."

In her highly praised autobiography *Walls*, Zassenhaus remembers writing a paper for her high school class about a rally that she attended where Hitler spoke prior to becoming chancellor of Germany: "The loudness of his voice can silence you, but it cannot convince, I had written... I ended my essay with the words, 'Hitler is a psychotic!'"

Young Hiltgunt, whose name means "struggle" in old

German, received an A for her critical paper on Hitler. However, after the dictator's rise to power, she found it considerably more difficult to condemn the man who would lead Germany into the Second World War and alter the course of modern history.

After the new government took power, an order was issued throughout the land that students must raise their arms and yell "Heil Hitler" whenever a teacher entered a classroom. Every student in Zassenhaus's class obeyed the order—except Zassenhaus herself. Eventually, the school principal came to her class to see that all students followed the order. In a display of frustration and defiance, Hiltgunt flung her arm outward in the proper salute fashion—and smashed a nearby window, with blood spurting wildly from her badly slashed limb.

"Hitler was forgotten," she writes in *Walls*, "and from then on, no teacher entering class looked in my direction. They simply ignored me."

Because of her natural intellect, however, Zassenhaus wasn't ignored for long. After receiving a degree in Scandinavian languages and taking medical classes at the University of Hamburg, the Nazis recruited her to censor the mail coming from and going to Scandinavians charged with working against the Third Reich. Despite her own antagonism toward the Nazi regime, Zassenhaus took the job, considering it an excellent chance to quietly damage the despicable efforts of Hitler and his henchmen. Instead of censoring the letters, she often included messages asking for clothing and food for prisoners.

Later, when Zassenhaus's job required her to visit with those Scandinavians considered opponents of the regime, she smuggled medicine and other supplies to prisoners, who totalled about 1,200 and were confined to 52 camps around Germany. Despite a few close calls, no one ever grew suspicious of Zassenhaus because of her high position with the Nazis' Department of Justice. Nonetheless, she always carried a gun with her in order to commit suicide if ever discovered.

"I was often almost overwhelmed by fear," she confessed to the St. Paul students. "But being scared is what makes us human. My

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conscience told me helping these people was something I had to do. Had I been discovered, I would've been sent to a concentration camp. But I would've done it until my very last breath."

Toward the end of the war, rumors of Day X, the date that Hitler planned the mass execution of Germany's political prisoners before the impending allied liberation, reached Zassenhaus, who knew the whereabouts of all the Scandinavian prisoners scattered around the country. With the help of the Red Cross, she helped secure the safe escape of the 1,200 prisoners to Denmark. The infamous Day X arrived a week later, followed by the extermination of the majority of Germany's political prisoners.

After the war, Zassenhaus organized a relief program for German orphans and later completed her medical studies at the University of Copenhagen. She came to Baltimore upon the invitation of a professor at the University of Maryland's medical school. Today, she has a local private practice and is a staff member of the Greater Baltimore Medical Center.

Among her well-deserved honors are the Bundesverdienst Kreuz, the highest West German award given to a civilian, knighthoods conferred by the Kings of Denmark and Norway, and a Nobel Peace Prize nomination in 1974. Despite the accolades here and in Europe for her bravery during World War II, Zassenhaus refuses to accept the term which is often bestowed upon her—"hero."

"I've learned there are no such things as heroes," she said matter-of-factly. "There are only people who do extraordinary things at extraordinary times. My story is that I went with both eyes open into a tragedy that was happening to the family of mankind."

"I'm often asked why I did anything at all," Zassenhaus continued. "My father once told me about the Biblical passage of the Hebrews dancing around the golden calf. He wanted me to understand that you can't always just go along with what other people do or say. I didn't understand that at the time, but I do now."

Zassenhaus makes no excuses for the actions of the German people during World War II, noting that "their

silence and 'amnesia' about the subject is discouraging but a form of therapy. However, she stressed, "What happened in Germany can happen anywhere. It happened in Cambodia."

Zassenhaus told the St. Paul assembly that the time has come for humanity to stop distinguishing itself by race or nationality: "We must rise from our differences. Not the differences of being black and white, but our differences in attitudes. We must learn to live together."

"When a person is born into this world, they are like a stone that needs to be polished and developed. To become a human being is a long process. I hope we are all able to achieve this soon, because I fear our time is growing shorter and shorter. We must overcome the indifference and ignorance in our hearts and souls and let our conscience guide the way."